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" MY MOTHERLAND " SERIES XE. NO. 20

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THE WAY TO PROSPERITY
THROUGH RURAL INDIA

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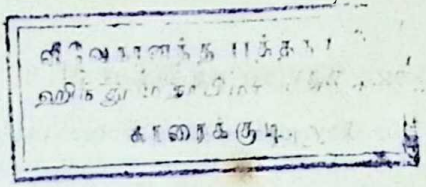

THE WAY TO PROSPERITY THROUGH RURAL INDIA

The stiffest problem that confronts the Indian patriot to-day is how to infuse life into our rural people. The village is not only dead to-day but is in process of putrefaction. The old corporate life is gone; and what is worse, disintegrating factors like litigation leave little scope to the reformer.

All the same, as there is no India outside the village, and as the towns and cities have developed into blood-sucking parasites in our national life, the question of reviving the villages has to be taken up and solved. It has been neglected too long; and the difficulties in the way have to be faced with the one single determination of surmounting them at all cost.

The very first need is to re-introduce the old corporate life. In almost every sphere, the village must be made as self-sufficing and self-reliant as national requirements will permit. Towards that end, there must be an elected Panchayat which shall have vast powers for good. Its membership need not be limited to five—in fact, it must have many more members, giving a chance of service to almost every decent citizen and they must all be elected on the basis of adult suffrage.

From among these members of the Panchayat should be chosen sub-committees, preferably by voting, for finance, justice and enonomic regeneration. If the village unit be large, the sub-committee for the last one may be further split up according to experience.

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Finance is the keynote of the whole problem and if Panchayats have not been, in the present circumstances, as successful and popular as they should be, the cause is to be sought in this defect. The Panchayats have not been given adequate financial powers or even resources.

The Great Drain

At this stage, let us briefly survey the present position. Take the case of a village that pays direct revenue to the extent of Rs. 1,000—in the shape of land-tax and local cesses. In fortunate cases hardly two hundred of the revenue is spent in the village ; and in the case of smaller units, not even a twentieth returns back. In fact here is the main reason why our villages have been driven to abject poverty. Year by year, they have to pay a vast sum, which does not return. It is a serious drain and no village, however wealthy, can stand it for years. Happily there has, in recent years, been a change for the better ; but it is not adequate.

The State must lay down that of all sums collected by way of direct taxation from within its limits, the village shall get, for its own maintenance, not less than half to start with; and as the finances of the nation are better organised that share must be increased to 75 per cent. And that sum must be placed at the disposal of the village Panchayat, giving it full scope to spend the same, subject to broad limitations.

Such a reform will at once make the Panchayat a real power in the area. It will attract the best citizens and the whole village will at once take a new life.

How this money is to be spent will be evident when we come to economic problems.

Judicial Powers

Next comes justice. Here again a serious mistake has been committed in recent legislation. The powers given to

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the Panchayat are inadequate and, what is worse, the scope for appeal against local decisions is too sweeping. The result is that Panchayats are unable to make themselves felt. The power of appeal should be confined only to cases of obvious oppression or corruption ; or where a person is sentenced to imprisonment ; beyond that, the Panchayat must be supreme.

It is sometimes argued that the grant of such vast powers may lead to injustice—specially in the case of undesirable people. That is of course so ; but will not even that possibility of injustice have beneficial effects ? Rowdies will naturally be more careful ; in fact, they will find no congenial atmosphere at all.

The danger however of these judicial powers being used to further the ends of parties or factions can be avoided largely by the selection of judicial Panchayatdars by lot. For instance, one board can be selected for each day by casting lots and where the complainant or accused objects to any member on valid grounds, provision may be made for appeal to the full Panchayat with a view to place the case before another board.

Not that injustice will be impossible under these rules. And even if there should be injustice, the effect in the long run will be salutary and the compensating advantages far greater. They will be far less loss on litigation. And let us not overlook the fact that even now, or under any system, judicial lapses cannot be effectively banished. And it is certainly no justice—at any rate, it is not worth having—if at the end of a litigation for Rs. 100 both the parties are compelled to spend at least Rs. 200 before they secure a final just decision !

Economic Impetus

It is in the economic sphere that most useful work has to be done.

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Agriculture must be the first to receive attention and three lines of advance must be planned. First, all methods of improved cultivation must be brought into use. The Panchayat must have a small plot where proved improvements can be demonstrated.

Very few people have any idea of the loss now sustained under this source.

By effecting a few improvements which can be brought within the scope of the ryots, official reports have been telling us for over a decade that the yield from some crops can be doubled. Still those improvements have not yet been introduced in very many large areas.

The necessary educative propaganda can be carried on only by the Panchayat ; and so conservative are our ryots that unless they see the improvements tested and proved before their very eyes, they will not accept them. Hence the need for demonstration farms at each rural centre at least for a few years to come.

Apart from improvements in their various crops, our rural people should be educated to make far better use of their lands.

Through the initiative of a social service organisation in Howrah, an attempt was made in some villages to utilise every available plot and it was found that the income to the ryots doubled in the course of two years. This is a line in which vast possibilities are open in almost every village. The only obstacle in the way is from the absentee landlord, who may utilise the improvements effected by the tenant to ask for more rent and thus deprive the latter of all the benefits accruing from his own exertions.

A Great Handicap

This evil, the insecurity of the tenant's holding, is one of the most serious obstacles confronting reformers all over

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India and it must be tackled at an early date. The ryot must be guaranteed the fruits of his labour and if the landlord increases the rent or ejects him for any other excuse, the laws of the land must see to it that the landlord compensates the tenant for the improvements effected by him. Such a guarantee will go a long way to improve agricultural yield, *i. e.*, to increase the national income ; and no reasonable landlord can object to such legislation.

The mischief on this score has not yet been adequately recognised in India. The moment the tenancy problem is taken up, vested interests create a big furore and cries of appropriation are raised. Most of these critics overlook the fact—that has been brought home by the actual achievements of other countries,—that tenants and cultivators can have justice without harming the landlords. The Irish Land Acts furnish an easy model. Landlords are given adequate compensation for lands taken from them and tenants pay it back in twenty to thirty easy instalments.

Whatever the method adopted, the nation suffers very badly if the cultivators are not given a direct interest in their holdings. And when they are given security of tenure or interest, the way is cleared for other improvement, specially the grant of loans for agricultural purposes. For the lending institution gets the security of the cultivators' occupancy rights. So rural uplift is doubly encouraged, first by encouraging the ryot to devote his best attention to the land ; and secondly by placing him in a position to secure financial aid on better terms.

Cattle Wealth

Third comes cattle. In respect of them, grazing grounds must be provided. Good work has already been done in this directions through forest Panchayats. In addition to the provision of these grazing grounds, numerous other facilities

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are essential. Most urgent is the provision of excellent bulls for the propagation of a better type of cattle. This can be done by the payment of grants to villagers who maintain such sires— a procedure that has been found most effective in Ireland and some of the European countries. A grant of rupees fifteen per annum should suffice in India.

At the same time, there must be a comprehensive scheme of cattle insurance and reinsurance. At present all growers of cattle are at the mercy of periodic epidemics, which act as a very serious deterrent to cattle-growing. Co-operative insurance is the only solution of the problem and if that is to be a success, there must be a central re-insurance society to share the risk. In Burma, cattle insurance had rapid expansion, but as quickly as it grew, it vanished in the wake of epidemics, because the village societies were unable to face the large losses caused by the epidemic in the absence of a central re-insurance society. And for re-insurance, at least at the outset, the State will have to provide the facilities, even at a slight loss. When veterinary aid becomes more general and there is an improvement in the stamina of the cattle, the re-insurance society can be conducted without loss, as is done in other countries.

Next comes the question of manure. Improvement in cattle will naturally place more manure at the disposal of the ryots. In addition, every village, wherever possible, must be given as large a strip of forest land as possible for green manure purposes—the only restriction imposed being the preservation of the forest.

Co-operative Possibilities

This brings us to the co-operative field, which has to play the most decisive part in the uplift work. Every village unit must have societies, apart from cattle insurance, for credit, and for the sale of village produce, and in addition,

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they must have links with central organisations such as mortgage banks or societies for the distribution of improved seeds and manure. Most of the bigger villages have already credit societies; but they are very poorly equipped with funds. Far more urgently than these are required societies for the sale of village produce, whose function it must be to send the particular product to the central organisation of its class, *i.e.*, if the two important crops of the village be cotton and groundnut, the rural produce society must send them to the central cotton sale society or central groundnut sale society.

The advantage from the creation of such facilities will be tremendous. The producer will get at least 50 per cent. more if not 100 per cent. more. At present he has to part with his produce at a time when the prices are lowest and then too at special prices to meet obligations incurred with the money-lender or the village merchant. Under the new arrangement, the moment he hands over his produce to the sale society, he will find it possible, to obtain on its security, loan from the same society or from the credit society and thus pay the kist and meet the other immediate charges without going to the money-lender.

Such arrangements are quite common in the West, in almost all the important agricultural countries, so that the picture given above is by no means Utopian. It is based on what has been accomplished in other lands, and what has been attempted with fair success even in India in those few areas where philanthropic institutions have provided the necessary supervision, and guidance, so essential in the early stages.

Take Care of Mothers

The maintenance of the village school has to be one of the main activities of the Panchayat and the demonstration agricultural plot will naturally be one of its adjuncts.

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It is very unfortunate that our rural schools should be providing only literary instruction. When their control passes into the hands of local people, there will be every encouragement to vocational instruction, specially along lines useful to the village. While agriculture will be one item the other will be spinning or any other handicraft which may be locally possible.

Before we come to this subject of handicrafts, it will be appropriate to mention some other activities which have to be entrusted to the Panchayats. As at present, village roads will naturally be their charge and next come village tanks and wells. Adequate attention has not so far been paid to this need, which in most areas is far more urgent than that of roads. Equally unfortunate has been the neglect of maternity needs. Whatever other function may be starved, no village should be without a fully trained midwife. Owing to her absence, thousands of lives are lost at present. Many more are consigned to a state worse than death or permanent injury to health. And be it noted that in some districts like Bellary, even the biggest of villages do not have a trained midwife—while in other countries not only is such assistance readily available but expectant mothers receive special grants!

The creation of these Panchayats, with greater powers and better supplied with funds, will immediately change the outlook of our villages. At present, no ambitious or capable person is willing to stay in rural parts. Under the changed conditions, they will be reluctant to leave the villages and migrate to towns. And if in addition to these reforms, steps are taken to encourage local handicrafts, the resuscitation of rural India will be almost accomplished.

Handicrafts

One such handicraft is already gaining ground—spinning; and be it noted that spinning never goes by itself. Each

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spinner desires to grow his or her own cotton and that is a gain to production. Then the work of ginning and carding employs some more people. Finally, a good number of weavers are maintained. The aggregate accession of wealth from all these sources is large; and even in the matter of spinning itself, the charge that the income is cruelly poor comes mainly from either knaves who are out to make political capital for themselves, or from fools who have not taken pains to study the problem. The average income of a villager in India rarely exceeds Rs. 3 per month at present, and one can easily earn a little more than that from spinning. Apart from it, spinning is recommended, not as the sole occupation, but as a subsidiary source of income and that too where any other is not available. The extra income of two rupees a month may not seem big enough to courtiers but to most village people it means all the difference between starvation and existence. And if one can increase our national income by only two rupees per month even for adults, the resulting improvement in our national wealth per annum is six thousand crores of rupees!

Of course, no one recommends spinning in villages where other handicrafts are possible and that is a choice which the local Panchayat has to make. For instance, in villages bordering on large towns, the cultivation of vegetables or flowers or stitching of dining leaves may offer better possibilities, but to a large majority, spinning is the only hope.

State Aid

And the income to the people from this source can be easily increased if the State be so inclined. Just ponder for yourself how different will be the situation if the import duties on yarn from other lands should be increased by fifteen or twenty per cent. and if an excise duty of ten per cent. should be levied on locally produced mill yarn. The

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profits from hand spinning will at once go up and what is more useful, there will be an excellent demand for the hand-spun. Even the mills will not complain as they are protected as against foreign competition and they will thus have equally good, if not better business.

For a time, the price of cloth will go up slightly but that will be only a passing phase. Very soon, spinning will be so universal that prices will come down from internal competition. Anyway, when the Nation agrees to pay a far higher price for the sake of a few cotton mills or manufacturing industries like that of Tata Steel, there can hardly be any valid complaint against a measure of protection the benefits of which will be so universal. And be it noted that in the sphere of Khadi there is the additional advantage of the new industry being built up in ideal conditions, in the very home of the people and that in healthy rural areas. So with the aid of the State, the Charka blessing can not only be rendered permanent but be extended to almost every home ; and sooner or later that will the case.

The encouragement of these handicrafts must be taken up on a co-operative basis, even spinning. The local society has merely to stock cotton, give it to the spinners either in slivers or by itself, receive the yarn and send it to the central society, which will either sell it in a lot or weave cloth from it on its own responsibility. Unfortunately, for political reasons, this excellent work has not so far received the encouragement it deserves, with the result that millions of people have been denied their only chance of improving their poor income.

Water and Health

The Panchayat can also take upon itself the management or the creation of irrigation facilities. The question of regulating the water supply from the village tank or canal can

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be best handled by it and when that is done, not only will a good sum of money that now goes in the shape of bribery be saved, but there will be occasion for far less friction and crime. Equally useful can the Panchayat be in the matter of creating new irrigation facilities. Pumping sets can be maintained jointly for the whole village or special portions thereof—an endeavour which has already been found both useful and practicable in several parts of India.

In Bengal, co-operative societies have been very usefully employed to fight malaria: and the Panchayats can easily take up such activities of general utility to the community. One of these will be the destruction of prickly-pear which is so rapidly extending in several areas. Properly utilised, it makes good manure and the land thus freed will be useful for grazing or gardening purposes, thus enriching both the village and the Panchayat.

Maintain Self-Respect

The only other reform necessary to complete the revival of the village is to see that public servants behave as public servants. At the present moment, villagers are at the mercy of petty officials, specially the poorer classes, who have to submit to conditions akin to forced labour. Moreover, the demand for free provisions when the Revenue Collector or Tahsildar stays in a village, must go. They may be hard only on the lower officials; but the latter transfer that oppression to the villagers. And here, it is not the financial loss that is so objectionable; it is the reaction of such pressure on the self-respect of the villagers. That must go. The villagers, specially the Panchayatdars, must be encouraged to feel that so long as they discharge their duties properly, they need fear none. The resident village officials must not at all be allowed to boss over the Panchayats. If the latter should so decide, it should be open to them to

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refuse to have the headman or the munsiff as their president or even as a member.

Similarly the higher officers must allow considerable latitude to the villagers, even the right to err; and they should interfere only in extreme cases, or where urgent public interests demand. The Panchayat should ordinarily enjoy complete freedom, subject only to censure by their own villagers.

It is the absence of such a free or self-respecting atmosphere that is responsible for the failure of recent attempts to revive the Panchayats. The superior executive officials expect an attitude bordering on servitude from the Panchayatdars, and the natural result is to keep out independently inclined persons. That bossing attitude must go. It must not be overlooked that the revival must be as decisive in the mental outlook of the villagers as in their economic condition. They must be encouraged to feel that they count in the life of the nation and that the State relies as much on their intelligent support as of the town folk and that it is ready and willing to make commensurate sacrifice for their sake. Quite the reverse is now the case. The masses do not at all count in the affairs of the State, with the result that they themselves have begun to feel that their function in life is to toil and suffer for others more fortunately placed. That inferior mentality must go at any cost; and to achieve that end, not only should they be given the right to manage their own affairs and even to commit mistakes, but they should not be treated as any other than self-respecting citizens by the agents of the State.

Broadly speaking, the aim of the State, in all these efforts at rural uplift, must be to restore the corporate life of the village which formed an excellent feature of our National existence almost for ages—until the British advent. The only departure now necessary is in respect of the Harijans. They

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shall enjoy equal rights with other inhabitants of the village in all the new amenities. They shall have access to all roads, tanks and wells constructed from public funds as also to the public school; and this reform will be considerably facilitated by the grant of adult franchise.

Voting Units

If the Panchayats be chosen and given powers on lines here indicated, their members will provide the voting units for the larger representative bodies such as District Boards, Provincial and Central Legislatures—thus removing the one argument which is now urged against adult suffrage, *viz.*, that the constituencies will then be too unwieldy.

These suggestions show that the reconstruction of rural life is not so difficult a problem as is generally urged. Success is assured if a determined effort is made; and unfortunately for India, the will is still lacking.

The foreign exports of the recent Banking Committee gave up the task as hopeless. Obviously they forgot the essential fact that 300 millions of people cannot be left for perpetuity in a state of abject poverty. If they had approached the task with goodwill, they could have formulated proposals for effective relief.

The indebtedness of the rural classes is variously estimated—from 400 crores to over a thousand. Whatever the sum be, it is not beyond the range of redemption. At the outside, the debts come to about thrice the annual production, so that if the yield of our rural people be increased by only twenty-five per cent. which is considered quite feasible by all critics, and half the increased savings be applied to repay the debt, the entire population will be free in a generation. Relief may also come, and must come, by way of revenue reductions. The land tax must be so readjusted that the burden on the poor is made good by increased rates on the richer classes such as

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Zemindars. When that just reform is introduced, the rural people will shake off their debts far more quickly.

In any case, relief, if it is to be appreciable, must come from the State. It will have to recast the taxation policy, provide funds to the Panchayats, and place far larger sums by way of loans at the disposal of co-operative institutions, including credit societies. The present policy of leaving those institutions to sift for themselves will mean stagnation. At least until the villagers are rehabilitated, State aid must generously flow in. Perhaps there is some risk involved in such a progressive policy ; but in view of the most depressed state of the rural areas, there is no alternative but to face it ; and whatever losses may be incurred in some unfavourable localities will be amply compensated for by the increase in National wealth and the resulting returns to the State exchequer.

(SECOND EDITION)

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